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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of British union, or parliamentary, debating in a college public-communication course. This debating format, practiced at British universities and used in the British House of Commons, promotes interaction between speaker and audience, emphasizing the effective methods of persuasive discourse that evoke audience response and participation. Its implementation by the Department of Theatre and Speech at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, produced widespread campus, community, and state visibility for the program, in addition to developing students' speaking and listening skills. (RL)

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BRITISH UNION DEBATING: AN ECLECTIC APPROACH

M. Lynn McCauley and Richard L. Stovall

Debate coaches develop philosophies of forensics, in part, as a result of their personal experiences in debate competition and their training in argumentation and debate. Unfortunately, a coach's philosophical justification for a forensics program may often be inadequately and imprecisely developed in his own mind. Rather than directing forensics activities in a manner congruent with his debating philosophy, a coach may consider his own philosophical convictions only in rare instances, e.g., in a job interview when a prospective employer raises the issue. However, in the 1970's, American universities have encountered extreme pressure to become accountable for their educational programs. As a consequence of these pressures a department's forensics philosophy is no longer a private concern.[1] We are no exception at the University of South Carolina. This essay describes the situation that led to the creation of our forensics program, the goals established for that program, the program's operation, and the results which we believe may be achieved in some degree at any institution of higher education.

In the summer of 1974, the University of South Carolina created a Department of Theatre and Speech. Formerly, theatre was simply a division of the English Department; speech, as an academic major and discipline, did not exist. Forensics, since the retirement of Dr. Merrill G. Christophersen some years earlier, had fallen on hard times. Consequently, debate was operated as a student-funded club that from time to time made feeble attempts to compete in intercollegiate tournaments. Regrettably, the club's inability to accomplish sound educational

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objectives or to expend its meager financial resources within established guidelines resulted in nothing but "bad press."

Consequently, shortly after the formation of the department, a series of discussions ensued to determine the nature and scope of the program in speech communication. We concluded that forensics would serve an integral function within overall departmental objectives. However, specific forensics goals were not set forth, with one exception. We wanted our new forensics endeavors to be of higher quality and to produce immediately discernible educational benefits.

Given the experience of those of us who were members of the department's speech communication division, it was without difficulty we agreed a forensics tournament experience produces numerous benefits. We steadfastly held to the concept that tournament debating teaches analytical and organizational skills as well as skills in problem solving.[2] Nevertheless, we had certain reservations regarding current forensics trends. First, we were concerned that tournament debating is no longer an educationally justifiable means of instruction in delivery skills. Second, forensics competition neglects even a smattering of training in persuasion. And, finally, we believe that intercollegiate debate does not provide students with experience in handling audience situations.[3]

At the same time we were formulating the goals for the forensics program, we were evaluating the nature and scope of our basic course in public communication. After extensive discussions, we agreed that assigned classroom speeches are too limited; a need existed to provide our students with speaking experiences before large audiences. Thus, our public communication course and our forensics program, faced a common problem: application of the persuasive, audience-centered encounter. British union or parliamentary debating, a tradition borrowed from

British universities and based on the format used in the House of Commons,[4] seemed to be a viable means of fulfilling and facilitating this educational objective.

The procedures used to implement British union debating are relatively simple and inexpensive.[5] Among the most important of these is the selection of debate topics. We chose to poll students in the multiple sections of our public communication course. Providing students with a list of potential topics, we ask them to select three propositions in which they are interested and to indicate their support or opposition to each. The final selection is made on the basis of the topics that receive the highest number of votes tempered by the proposition with the most widely divided student opinion.[6]

A second consideration faced was arranging a suitable facility in which to house the event. While we want to provide seating for most of our audience, we think a feeling of urgency and excitement comes if a significant number of persons are forced to stand. Thus, we use a limited number of chairs -- evenly divided in number -- that are arranged to face a central aisle, much like the layout of the British House of Commons.

Third, rules were established to govern the parliamentary debating. Procedurally, a chairperson opens our debates by announcing the proposition, explaining the rules, introducing the speakers, and keeping order as the debate progresses. Specifically, our rules allow for two brief opening speeches, one in support and one in opposition to the resolution. Following these presentations by members of the debate squad, the floor is open for comments by audience members. The chairperson alternates recognition between the pro and con members. Audience participants are allowed to address the

initial speaker or their opponents across the aisle. Much like the House of Commons, heckling is tolerated; individuals may even choose to switch sides. At the end of the debate, the house is divided to determine the outcome.

As with other coaches, we decided the activity was important enough to merit the interest of other campus and community groups. Thus, we set ourselves to the task of advertising the event. Using a slide of Churchill's statue in the Members' Lobby of Westminster Palace in London, a student artist created a symbol to represent the event on posters distributed on campus. News releases are prepared for the campus and the local press. In a day when campuses are saturated with announcements of important events, our publicity has resulted in modest, but nevertheless discernible, increases in audience size.

On the other hand, the educational benefits that resulted were not immediately obvious. The first few debates were particularly difficult for the debaters who found that actual audiences do not respond to attacks of inherency, attitudinal motivation, and extra-topicality. Only after continuing negative feedback from the debating audiences did our debaters begin to modify their debating techniques. At the same time, students in our beginning public communication course find that ill-reasoned, excessively emotional, and poorly delivered remarks, although often used in public debate, are frequently not an effective means of persuasion. Nevertheless, our British union debates have come to have an aura and fervor reminiscent of camp meetings and public debates of past generations.

The educational worth of British union debating may best be assessed from three distinct perspectives: the learning experience for intercollegiate debaters, the learning experience for fundamentals students, and the overall

effect as a contribution to the life of the university. At Carolina, our debaters' initial reaction to the audience debates was less than enthusiastic. They saw little reason to expend their efforts in an endeavor that awarded no trophies. Their low motivational profile was accentuated by their initial failure to persuade or arouse audiences. As a consequence of faculty suggestions and the satisfaction they received from publicity and audience feedback, our debaters began to significantly improve their parliamentary debating skills. Concurrently, they now make asides about having achieved a bilingual status. They are able to successfully utilize the technical jargon of intercollegiate debate on the one hand, while, on the other, they have become successful public communicators.

Our students of public communication tell us that they too look forward to these encounters. Surprisingly, a significant number feel compelled to express their views on such questions as abortion, the presidential election, and American intervention in the Middle East.[7] Nearly all sharpen their skills as discriminating listeners. Poorly delivered, excessively emotional, undocumented, or ill-reasoned arguments by either the debaters or speakers from the floor are quickly labelled as such. In short, students see the pitfalls of which their instructors have cautioned them. Additionally, they have the opportunity to hear issues discussed and aired that would otherwise perhaps remain undiscussed.

From a departmental perspective -- particularly departmental visibility -- British union debate has been quite effective. Although we were aware from our observation of other universities' parliamentary debating programs that union debating possessed a potential for enhancing a department's public relations, we

were not fully aware of all the possibilities. Because our program -- as is the case with those of other universities -- has established and/or enhanced contacts with other departments and faculty members, attracted a modest interest with the local news media, gained favorable administrative attention, and provided a means for participation in the international debater's tour, we believe a detailed discussion of these beneficial effects on the campus and community is warranted.

As Owen Peterson suggests, British union debating allows for the use of an almost unlimited variety of topics.[8] We soon discovered that a director of forensics, beyond meeting the interests of a wide cross-section of undergraduates, has an immediate drawing card with colleagues in other disciplines. They, in turn, are in positions to channel their departmental majors into classes in argumentation, public communication, and persuasion. Additionally, our department has hosted a number of receptions for students, administrators, and faculty members who have an interest in a particular topic. We believe such student-faculty interaction is healthy for all those concerned. Two years ago, for instance, we had a large delegation of students and a faculty sponsor in the ROTC program attend a debate on American intervention in the Middle East. On another occasion, a large group of Catholic students and their sponsor attended a debate on abortion. In selecting a variety of appealing propositions and in hosting these receptions, our department enhances the prestige of speech communication as a discipline, gains debaters for the debate squad, and recruits students for our upper-level courses.

Additionally, these efforts -- coupled with campus newspapers, radio, and yearbook coverage -- have brought the department praise from our university's central administration. In fact, the vice president for academic affairs recently

told our departmental head that British union debating is a more beneficial co-curricular activity than intercollegiate debating. He noted that despite the fact that Carolina's debaters have brought home the hardware, those students actively involved are few in number. For him, the attractiveness of British union debating comes because it involves several hundred students.

Once the campus newspaper and local print media regularly covered our debates, South Carolina ETV began to take an interest in the event. Through contacts with a director who is employed by the state's ETV, we produced two thirty-minute broadcasts of the debates. For the first, a mobile unit with a crew of five to ten technicians spent an entire day setting up and filming one of our on-campus debates. On another occasion, we modified the format and took our debaters to the local studio. These two telecasts covered the state.

With our added visibility and administrative support, we availed ourselves of the exchange program operated by the Speech Communication Association's Committee on International Debate and Discussion.[9] Last year, we hosted two gentlemen from Oxford. Following an amusing clash over the American Revolution, we honored them with a reception at Lace House, an antebellum home across from the governor's mansion used by the state government for important social functions. A member of our university's governing board, the provost, a vice president, a large number of our university colleagues, and two to three dozen members of the local chapter of the English-Speaking Union were among the guests. This spring, the English-Speaking Union has agreed to co-host and co-fund a similar affair when two debaters from the University of Edinburgh come to our campus. Next year, we hope to secure the support of the departments of history, international studies, foreign languages, and journalism in sponsoring a Russian team or some other unusual debating pair.

Since hosting international debaters has enhanced our campus, community, and state visibility, we are now considering the possibility of hosting prominent political, economic, and social leaders as guest speakers.[10] Christopher Hollis, in his history of the Oxford Union, observes that numerous British Leaders -- Lord Randolph Churchill, David Lloyd-George, G. K. Chesterton, Nevill Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, and Anthony Eden -- have appeared as guest speakers of the Oxford society.

American politicians, journalists, writers, and leaders should be equally interested in a college platform. Perhaps the best known recent example of using well-known individuals in such a setting was the appearance of Lowell Weicker and William F. Buckley for the Yale Union during the Watergate crisis. Large or prestigous universities may have both the funds and the appeal to secure the services of individuals of the note of Weicker and Buckley. On the other hand, local and state politicians, particularly in election years, are potential guests for the British union format. Or, faculty members in other disciplines may be willing to debate one another in this sort of setting. The possibilities of variations on the format are numerous.

Whether or not a director of forensics chooses to include non-student speakers, the department that sponsors British union debating contributes, in some modest way, to the intellectual life of a campus. By creating a forum in which students may hear and debate the critical issues of the day, members of our discipline surely enrich the intellectual atmosphere of a college or university.

Additionally, parliamentary debating serves as a means to an end, both for forensics and fundamentals programs. It broadens the perspective of debaters to include educational objectives and to place debating on another level beyond the competitive one. British union debating offers students in fundamentals

of communication an opportunity to sharpen their skills as communicators and as discerning listeners in situations that are not as remote or artificial as the classroom. By placing educational values upon research and analysis, as well as audience adaptation and good speaking skills, we believe directors of forensics come a step closer to combining the techniques of logos, pathos, and ethos into an effective program that not only directly benefits students enrolled in work under the supervision of a department of speech communication but the university community at large.

ENDNOTES

Mr. McCauley (Ph.D., 1974, Louisiana State University) is Assistant Professor and Coordinator for Speech and Mr. Stovall (Ph.D., 1975, The Ohio State University) is Assistant Professor and Director of Forensics at the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

[1] The National Developmental Conference on Forensics undertook as one of its major objectives the establishment of a rationale for charting the future direction of forensics education.

[2] Numerous studies have attested to the values of academic debate, e.g., Henry L. Ewbank, "What's Right with Debate," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 37 (April 1951), 197-202; John R. Stewart and Jerrold J. Merchant, "Perceived Differences Between Debaters and Non-Debaters," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 6 (Spring 1969), 67-72; Richard Huseman, Glenn Ware, and Charles Gruner, "Critical Thinking, Reflective Thinking, and the Ability to Organize Ideas: A Multi-Variate Approach," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 9 (Summer 1972), 261-265; Russell Taylor Church, "The Educational Value of Oral Communication Courses and Intercollegiate Forensics: An Opinion Survey of College Prelegal Advisors and Law School Deans," Journal of the American Forensic Association, 12 (Summer 1975), 49-55. See also Thomas Kane, "British Union Debating: Exercise in Utility or Futility," SCA Convention, San Francisco, California, December, 1976.

[3] Scott Nobels, "The Issues of Forensics," in Forensics as Communication: The Argumentative Perspective, ed. James H. McBath (Skokie: National Textbook Company, 1975), pp. 52-58. See also James L. Golden, "Debate: Rhetoric and Relevancy," SCA Convention, San Francisco, California, December, 1976.

[4]See Christopher Hollis, The Oxford Union, (London: Evans Brothers Limited, /1965/) for an extensive history of the Union at Oxford and a brief account of a similar society at Cambridge. Additionally, it should be noted that the authors had previous experiences with parliamentary debating. The current program is, in part, modeled after the long-standing and successful parliamentary forum at Louisiana State University.

[5]The normal cost for such an event is approximately $100.00 for advertising, facility, and sound equipment. Receptions, if used in conjunction with the debate as we indicate later in this essay, vary in cost depending on the number of guests and type of food and beverages provided. There are not indirect costs for the program, since our time is considered as a regular part of our duties. In total, it is possible to host four parliamentary debates each year for a cost of approximately travel to and participation in one regional intercollegiate debate tournament. The University of South Carolina forensics program encompasses ten to twelve debate trips, about twelve to fifteen students, and a budget of $8,000.00 to $10,000.00 per year. Additionally, one intercollegiate and two high school tournaments are sponsored annually.

[6]In addition to the topic areas mentioned, since 1974 debates have centered on the death penalty, university support of intercollegiate athletics, gun control, powers of the United States Presidency, amnesty, the world food crisis, and busing.

[7]Currently, audiences number in the vicinity of 400-500 per debate.

[8]Owen Peterson, "Forum Debating," Speech Teacher, 14 (November 1965), 286-287.

[9]This program began with A. Craig Baird's debaters from Bates College traveling to Britain in 1921. Currently, the association sponsors several foreign teams in the States and American teams overseas.

[10]Bruce Markgraf, "The Parliamentary Debate in Action," Speech Teacher, 12 (September 1963), 219-222, tells of using such speakers at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Connecticut.